

Inner Workings

by BlazingLegend

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Summary: Little and not so little things that make the friendship between Rikki, Bella, Emma and Cleo work the way it doesâ€"or not. Drabble-shots about the mermaid sisterhood, through their eyes and their friends'. (Mostly rated under T.)

1. Rain

Inner Workings

**WARNINGS: **Not edited. This violates my entire code of life, but the point of these are to be carefree. But now you'll finally get to see how much I suck when I don't edit! Yay! (Not yay.) NO PAIRINGS EXCEPT FOR CANON. If there's anything that suggests otherwise, it's just cutesy and harmlessâ€"or totally unintentional. Most will be rated Kâ€"K+, but sometimes T.

**For those who don't know: **_A __drabble __is an extremely short work of fiction exactly one hundred words in length and not maintaining much or any real plot or direction, although the term is often misused to __indicate __a short story of fewer than one-thousand words._

* * *

><p>Rain**

* * *

><p>"I, officially, hate the world."<p>

Rikki spun around in the computer chair, and again, and again. "Seriously, Bella, it took you that long to realise?"

Emma scoffed before Bella could answer her. "It's because you, Rikki darling, are a serious narcissistic and pessimistic personality and

very possibly a serial killer," she paused and cocked her head. "And you are none of those things, are you, Bella?"

Bella shook her head, squinting at them. "No. No, _I'm _notâ€" she stopped, gesturing between the two of them "â€"but you two are some serious freaks."

Rikki snorted and stared at the ceiling. "Like you're any different."

Bella ignored her and went on. "I wonder what Cleo's doing?"

"Same stuff we're doing, I guess," Emma said in a wondering voice. "But stuck inside with a bratty sister and a father who wants to know every little thing she's done since she left home..."

"I bet she's sorry she ever thought it would be nice to see her family again." Rikki said, still looking up at chipping paint.

Emma grinned. "Oh yeah."

Bella let out a small laugh. "What's Lewis doing, then?"

Rikki interrupted, sitting up straight, "So, is this how we do it now? Just go round the group till we run outta people?" she stopped, waving her hand in the air. "Alright thenâ€"if anybody cares, I am sitting here contemplating melting you guys for fun."

Emma turned on her with a hard stare. "Nobody cares."

Rikki threw a piece of balled up paper at her. "You suck. Seriously. You suck."

Emma ducked in time. "I thought the world sucked."

"You're _in _the world, stupid."

* * *

><p>As I said. No plot.</p>

Whatsoever.

2. Cake

I've sprained my wrist. My left wrist (I'm left handed.) I wrote up a few drabbles and miscellaneous chapters before it happened, but now it's getting really hard, so sorry 'bout that.

* * *

><p>Cake_

* * *

><p>"But..."</p>

Rikki slammed the plate down. Her face was stained with flour and icing. "What is it _now?_"

Before Cleo could answer, Rikki said, "I've done everything. I made the cake, put up the decorations, found the stupid special flour or whatever. I hate baking. So much. And I still did it!"

"Rikki." Emma hissed, poking her shoulder. "Shut up. It's her birthday."

"It's fine." Cleo said. "I'm being bratty. It's just... Lewis isn't here."

"Of course." Rikki muttered, tossed her apron on the floor and walked away.

"Rikki!" Bella called. "What are you doing?"

"Putting my stupid makeup on!"

* * *

><p>That one was a real drabble. Oh my gosh. I'm so proud of myself.</p>

3. Flowers

**_Flowers_*
* * *

><p>There was a knock at the door.</p>

Emma pressed her glasses further up her nose and turned the page of her book. "Will you get that, Rikki?"

She threw her head back into the cushions. "Oh, why _me?_"

Emma glared at her. "No one else is home, idiot. I'm studyingâ€"you, however, are having a flame war with your boyfriend. Get the stupid door."

Rikki let out another groan, but got up and went for the door. A moment later her voice floated out, annoyed. "There's no one there, Em."

"Really? Must be some sort of prank. You really would have thought the creeps in 24B would have stopped jerking us around when you set fire to their drapes, but whatever. Just leave it, Rikki."

"Meh. Alright. I'll send them a freaky letter tomorrow. Ought to set 'em straight."

"Yeah, whatever. Just shut up and let me study, alright?"

"Jeez, jeez, why so crabby?" she started to close the door, but there was a bang, and so she stopped. "What's that?"

"_I _don't know. You're the one standing there. Look, idiot!"

Rikki glowered down at her. "I told Cleo this moving in deal was a

bad idea. We're going to kill each other before the year's out," she said.

There was a pause. "It's a basket."

"A basket? For goodness sake, bring it inside! Idiot."

"Stop _calling _me that," Rikki said, coming inside, a basket springing forth with flowers weighing down her arms. "What is it?"

Emma sighed. "I may as well stop studying. In fact, I think all efforts are pointless while you are still in _existence. _And how am I supposed to know what it is? It's obviously a gift basket. Who is it for?"

"I don't know."

"Read the card!"

She shrugged. "Think they're for me. Dunno why. Flowers suck."

"Yes, yes. We all know this. You hate any sort of indication of any fondness of any kind. I don't even know why you have a boyfriend. Idiot."

"I'm not an idiot!"

"Uh, yeah, yeah you are. Now be _quiet _and let me get back to my books."

"You and your books," Rikki said. "Maybe you should marry them."

"What are you, ten?"

"In looks, sureâ€"oh!" she said.

Emma groaned. "What? What what _what?_"

Rikki walked over and dumped the basket on Emma's stomach while she let out an according _oohf_. "They're from Ash. They're for you." She said. "Good thing, too. I hate flowers."

* * *

><p>Happy face.</p>

4. Music

Music

* * *

><p>"Turn that down."</p>

"Make me." Rikki clutched the stereo.

"I will. Don't think I won't."

Rikki shrugged.

"Come on," Bella said. "I don't like confrontation. It's, like, the one definitive thing you know about me."

"I know you're a fish."

"You are too. Turn it down, or so help me..."

Rikki turned it up, and suddenly there was a loud bang, and Cleo came through with her palms pressed to her head.

"Oh my _gosh, _I'm going crazy here! I'll buy you another one. But for the next _week, _Rikki Chadwick, you are banned from any form of music! Peroid."

5. Mirror

Mirror

* * *

><p>"I don't like this mirror."</p>

"I don't know," Bella said, flipping the pages of her magazine while Emma frowned at her reflection. "I think it's fine. Why don't you like it?"

Emma sighed, as if Bella had no artistic taste and therefore should be eradicated from existence. "It's not full body length, which if you'll remember, is what I asked forâ€"and the frame is all wonky."

Rikki glanced up from her laptop. "Yes, but you're strange. And wired a different way to the rest of the human race. Put the mirror back up. It's fine."

"No it isn't."

Cleo scrunched up her face as her glasses slid further down her nose. "If anybody wants my opinion, I like the mirror."

Emma glowered at her, and Bella leant sideways to whisper, "I'm pretty sure she doesn't want your opinion."

Rikki huffed. "Stop being a ciborg for half a minute, Em, and put the stupid mirror back up and let me get back to my social networking."

"I was studying the other day while you were doing your so called social networkingâ€"" Emma said, "â€"which I'm pretty sure is just finding clever ways to spell out swearwords so the site won't blank themâ€"" she smirked, "â€"and I didn't freak on you."

Rikki held up a finger while she jabbed at a few more keys. "For your information, I'm not freaking on you. And, for another thingâ€"you totally did. You screamed at me and told me _exactly _where I could go in some not very ladylike terms."

"Fine. Maybe I did. But I don't like the mirror. And you can just shut up."

Bella groaned. "Please, do not turn this into another war in which Cleo and I will have to lose our lives," she said. "Put the darn mirror back up."

"It looks funny."

Rikki let out a large huff, slammed her laptop down, and reached over and grabbed the book Cleo was reading out of her hands--to which she responded with an outraged hey!

She threw the book at Emma, and it hit her smackdab in the face. She blinked at Rikki, her cheeks colouring with fury.

"There. That is nature's way of telling you to put the stupid mirror back up!"

6. Schoolwork

Schoolwork

* * *

><p>"Hey, Bella. What are you doing?" Cleo said as she sat down, glasses poised atop her nose, an old faded and torn up copy of Gone With The Wind in her hands.

Bella frowned down at her computer, fiddling with her earlobe and twisting her lightbulb shaped earring. "Trying to figure out how on earth to write this essay before the due date."

"That's a toughie," Cleo said, blowing out her cheeks. "I would tell you to ask Emma, but she's in her room studying up on anatomy. For the next few weeks, she's probably going to be brimming with gross tidbits, so watch out."

Bella laughed. "'Kay. I'll keep an eye open at all times."

Cleo nodded. "Good for you. But, anyway--ask Rikki. By some miracle, no matter how hard she tries, she hasn't failed any of her classes this year. Maybe she'll sneak you a few tips."

Bella pouted and moaned, "But I know how she does it."

Cleo sat up straight, whipped her glasses off, and blinked at the other girl. "Really? Glory hallelujah--how?"

Bella threw her head against the couch cushions, closing her eyes. "Her teachers have crushes on her. Even some of the girls. And her tendency for flirting doesn't help."

The excited glow from Cleo's eyes faded, and she looked quite like she'd been promised a ticket to heaven but had just been denied entry at the gates. "Oh. Okay then."

Suddenly Emma rushed through, the bathroom door closing with an

almighty slam behind her. Vomiting sounds could be heard even through the thick wood.

"Well, it's official," Rikki said, skulking through the living room and sitting down with the other girls, "Em is definitely not going to be a doctor."

7. Fashion (Schoolwork)

Fashion (Schoolwork)

* * *

><p>"You have strange earrings."<p>

Bella frowned as her hand flew up to her earlobe. She sighed, her eyes going back to her laptop screen. "Are you judging my choice of fashion now?"

"No, noâ€"" Cleo said, then her eyebrows rose, "â€"but if you think about it, earrings aren't really fashion, are they?"

Bella glanced at her, then shrugged. "I think they are."

Cleo let out a pondering sound. "No, I don't think they are."

"Sure they are. Purses are, shoes are. Earrings are part of an ensemble. Why can't they be fashion?"

"They're, like, tiny."

Bella shot her another look. "Chihuahuas in pink leather bags are considered fashion, and that's grotesque and seriously cruel. Earrings are _so _fashion."

"I'm telling you, they aren't," Cleo said, shaking her head.

Rikki looked over at them and snorted. "They could make a sitcom about you two. Australia's favourite dysfunctional lesbian couple."

Bella glared back at her. "You seriously think _we _would be a better fit for that than you and _Emma?_"

Rikki's face scrunched and she went back to her magazine.

"Yeah, you betterâ€"" Bella paused, and trailed off lamely, "â€"read,"

Cleo continued on as if Rikki had never spoken. "Earrings aren't fashion. It'd be stupid. Think about it."

"Oh my _gosh, _Cleo, I'm trying to study here. Just be quiet." Bella said, swatting at her.

"So I win?"

"No. Just because I'll fail if I continue in this random debate, does not mean you are right." Bella said.

There was a weak voice from over in the corner of the room. Emma stood there, looking a little pale, her eyes big. She sniffed. "I just lost my lunch _and _breakfast, I've just found out there's no chance of me fulfilling the dream job I've had since I was sixteen, and _this _is what you're talking about?"

8. Candles

**Candles**

* * *

><p>Rikki pinched her nose and grimaced.</p>

Bella shot her a look. "What? Do you have a brain freeze or something?"

She rolled her eyes. "A brain freeze? Seriously? Noâ€œ" her face bunched up again and she groaned. "â€œit's those candles Cleo bought. They stink."

Bella shrugged, tugging on a strand of her dishwater blonde hair. "I like them. It's rosemary or something. Supposed to help you study."

She groaned again, "Screw studying. It's messing up my brain. I think I'm gonna puke."

Bella sighed. "Then run off to the bathroom and stop disrupting my quiet evening, or admit to being a drama queen and be quiet."

"I don't see me winning in either of those situations."

"Mmm. Wonder why that is."

"Can't we put them out or something? You're not supposed to have an open flame in an apartment, are you?"

"No. We can't put them out. And before you askâ€œit's because _I _say so. And of course you're allowed to have candles in apartmentsâ€œ" she paused, "â€œbesides, why are you so safety conscious all of a sudden? _You _were the one who wanted to ride the rugs down the stairs. Don't give me that 'open flame' crap."

Rikki huffed. "I'll put them out. I will."

Bella shrugged. "I'll light them again."

She smirked. "You can't. You don't have my power."

"With a _lighter, _stupid."

* * *

><p>That rosemary thing is true. The scent helps you retain information. Though I don't think it would work with candlesâ€œI think it'd have to be the real deal to actually help anything.</p>

9. Hamster

Hamster

* * *

><p>Rikki let out a screech and scuttled away from Bella, holding a balled up magazine in a fierce defense.</p>

"Relax!" Bella said, eyeing her up. "He won't hurt you. Will you, Snookums?" she said.

"Get that hairyâ€"hairyâ€"hairy abomination away from me!" Rikki said, glaring at the wriggling ball of fluffy pet hamster Bella was holding up in pride. "I will report you to the authorities!"

Bella scoffed. "What authorities?"

Rikki scrunched her nose. "The building manager. Are you even allowed to have that thing in here? Because I will report you, friendship be damned!"

Bella shook her head. "Nice. Real nice. And yes, I think so, I think it's fine,"

"Well _check. _Doesn't one of us at least have allergies or something?"

Bella made a face. "Nope. Lewis doesâ€"maybe? I don't know. He spends all his time drooling on Cleo, it's hard to have a genuine conversation with the guy."

"Well at least get it away from _me._" She said. "And I hardly think Em will like it much either. Do you know how much a hamster sheds?"

"No. Do you?"

"No. But I bet it's a lot."

Bella clucked her tongue, ushering the hamster back into his cage. "Imagine the fearless Rikki Chadwick being afraid of something as harmless and adorable as my little Snooky Wooky." She paused, snapping her fingers. "Hey! Maybe that's it. Maybe you're a vampire. Anything adorable and you melt."

Rikki glared at her. "You got, like, every _part _of that sentence wrong." She said. "First of all, it's witches that meltâ€""

"Do I really look like someone who would care?"

"Do I really look like someone who won't throw that _fuzzball _down the trash chute while you sleep?"

Bella gasped and clutched the cage. "You wouldn't! You monster!"

"I'm not a monster. That thing is the monster."

"He's, like, six inches in diameter."

"It doesn't matter. I'm leaving," she said, getting up.

Bella blinked at her. "Where are you going?"

"To report you to the building manager. Then animal control. Then Emma, because she'll freak when she sees that thing totally just peed on the couch."

10. Plushie

Plushie

* * *

><p>"What the heck is that?"</p>

"What's what?" Cleo said, blinking at Rikki. Her eyes fell upon the cream-coloured-but-rapidly-browning toy seal, lying on the other couch, staring at them with one falling-out eye, the other one blanked out by someone's sharp nails.

She let out a small sound of recognition. "Oh. That's Sealey. I've had him since I was tiny."

"First of all--you're still tiny." Rikki said. "Second of all--he looks retarded."

Cleo gasped. "No! No he doesn't!" she said, and scooped the toy up in her arms. "And don't use those kinds of words. It's offensive and insulting."

"I hate to say it, Cleo, but aren't those two words synonyms?"

"No... well, yeah, maybe... you're _mean._"

"No, all I am is right. And awesome. Pretty awesome." She said. "But Bella will agree with me."

"No she won't. Bella's a sweetie. You aren't." Cleo hugged the plush closer. "Besides, she's at work."

"Bella will definitely agree with me. She's the bluntest person I know."

"That isn't true. She's only blunt when she's hammered."

Rikki blinked. "I get the feeling we're getting off topic."

Cleo nodded. "Yes, yes we are." She said. "Lewis will agree with me."

Rikki snorted. "He's your _boyfriend. _So totally biased."

"No he isn't! He's always honest."

"Ah, no, no way. When he dropped Emma's iPod in his cereal, he didn't tell her for two and a half weeks."

"With good reason. He wore that bandage for month."

"A month?" Rikki said with a scoff. "Please. You're exaggerating."

"_No, _I'm not... well, yeah, maybe I am."

Rikki snorted. "I can see _you're _definitely not honest."

Cleo glanced over at her water bottle. "It's kind of in the job description."

Rikki made a face. "I suppose so."

Cleo stared up at her, eyes wide. "Are we getting off topic again?"

11. Tree

Everybody listen up, kay? You might get mad at me if you don't and _you _certainly don't want that because we all know you love me, right? Right.

News: The next three chapters (this one included) are from a different drabble-shot story of mine, one focused on the gang as kids. I just couldn't be bothered keeping up with both so here ya go.

* * *

><p>Tree_

* * *

><p>Emma Gilbert leant out of the old oak tree, her braids unravelling around her face and her small white teeth painted in a grin.<p>

Cleo Sertori giggled by her side, wiping her damp face and peering out from behind the leaves. "That was mean,"

"But funny." Emma wagged her fingers in the air, waving down at the wounded and howling Zane Bennett on the ground below.

"But mean."

"But _funny!_"

Cleo looked out again, tugging on her matching braids. "It is pretty funny..."

Emma hopped out of the tree, swinging with prowess from the branches and sliding down the bark effortlessly. She brushed off her dress, leaning over the groaning Zane. "You don't mess with my best friend, alright?"

With a moan he rolled over onto his stomach, shaking his head against the dirt. "No," he choked out.

She nudged him with the toe of her sandal. "No, _what_?"

"No ma'am!"

She threw back her small blonde head, her melodious laughs echoing around the foliage.

Cleo blinked from her spot atop the tree. "Em?"

Emma swirled around, eyebrows raised. "Cleo?"

"I can't get down!"

Emma stalked up to the tree, extending her arms and waving them around. "I'll catch you."

Trickles of bark plopped to the ground as her feet shifted. She squeezed her eyes shut, letting out a small shriek and clutching at a tree branch. "I can't move,"

Emma frowned. "Well, we have a pre-dic-a-ment," she said, sounding out the word.

Lewis trotted past, spotting Cleo hanging petrified in the tree and skidding to a stop. "What's going on?"

"Cleo can't get down."

"Hmm," he said. He spied Zane crawling away from the group and shook his head. "Let me guessâ€"Zane just _happened _to fall out of the tree?"

Emma turned to him, a smile crisscrossing her face. "Yup. It was pretty funny, actually."

He shook his head again, but his lips were creeping upward. "Okay," he looked up at Cleo, who blinked at him. "So, Cleo, how do we get you down?"

She bit her lip. "I don't know. I don't like it up here."

"How about you just try," he said. "Try, and if you fall, I'll catch you?"

Her eyes squeezed shut and she shook her head, her dark plaits whipping back and forth. "No! I'll hurt myself!"

"I'll catch you, okay? Promise." He watched as she opened her eyes and stared down at him. He raised his pinky finger to the air, a smile carving tracks in his face. "_Promise._"

Her nose scrunched.

"C'mon, Cleo," Emma called to her, "Lewis doesn't break promises. Let alone pinky promises!"

One side of her face pulled tight, but she eventually nodded. "Okay.

Alright. But you have to catch me!"

"I will."

She wriggled out from her spot, letting out a small squeal when her dress snagged on a branch. She waved one leg in the air, still clutching at the tree.

"I'm going to catch you, Cleo," he had his arms outstretched, and he was nodding to her.

She shrieked as she let go, waiting to be swallowed up by the earth and keep going, down, down, forever.

I'll catch you. —

And you know what? He did.

They toppled over and rolled for a few seconds, but he shielded her head and the rest of her body from any bumps or bruises she may have sustained.

When they came to a stop, Emma was leaning over them, her face kneaded into a frown. "Hey. Why did you trust him and not me?"

12. Valentines

Valentines

* * *

><p>Emma's head split the surface of the water, and Cleo pushed down the button on the timer.</p>

She helped her friend out of the pool, squeezing her eyes shut against the glare of the water and ignoring her somersaulting stomach. "Em, that was great!"

Emma pulled off her cap, revealing dry blonde locks. "I could have done better," she said as she reached for a bottle of water.

Cleo frowned, crossing her arms. "You have to stop doing that, alright? Putting yourself down. You were amazing."

Emma waved her fingers in the air, pulling a face. "Fine. Let's go back to my house and get something to eat, okay?"

She smiled. "Good!"

They met up with Lewis on their way to Emma's place, who had been on the beach collecting sand samples or something else incredibly boring.

"Emma, Cleo, what have you been doing today?" he asked, peering at some bits of paper he held in his hands.

"I've been helping Em with her training," she looked at Emma, who shrugged. "She was really good. Not that she believes a word I say."

He laughed. "Of course she doesn't. Emma, listen to me when I say _you _are, like, the prodigy of athletics. And I'm pretty brainy, so I do not use the word prodigy lightly."

Emma laughed, running a hand through her loose hair. "Well, thanks. That means a lot, coming from Mr. Voted-Most-Likely-To-Be-A-Ciborg."

"Hey!" he ducked behind Cleo and gave Emma a soft whack with his textbook. "That isn't funny."

"I think it is. Cleo?"

Cleo raised her hands, shrugging. "I'm not taking sides."

Suddenly Emma twirledâ€"and that may have been to avoid another assault from Lewis, or it may have been because her eyes had achieved an abrupt twinkle. "_Oh! _Cleo, its Valentines tomorrow! Lewis, did you know that? Aren't you guys _excited?_"

Cleo glanced at Lewis, whose nose had crinkled as if Valentines was something foul and to be avoided. "I'm not that excited," she said with a shrug. Emma skidded to a stop and stared at her, slack-jawed.

"Why not? I swear, you guys are so weird."

"Because last year I didn't get any cardsâ€"except that mean one from Miriam Kent. And that joke one from Zane..." she paused, frowning. "Why do people like playing tricks on me?"

"It's not that, Cleo," Emma went over and wrapped an arm around her. "It's just that Zane and Miriam are absolute dunderheads and they deserve each other."

She shook her head. "But I still don't think I'll get any this year."

"Come on," she said. "Don't worry about it. For anyone who doesn't send you a cardâ€"well, then it's their fault because they're missing something amazing. Now hurry up! I'm starving!"

She raced forward, hopping over all the cracks in the pavement and twirling around every street light.

Lewis stood at her side, watching Emma shriek and teeter on her feet but then yell in the face of the vanquished crack.

"She's a weird one," he said, shaking his head.

"But we love her anyway, right?"

"Yes," he said, laughing. "Right."

XXX

Cleo opened her locker, ignoring the red tinted paper pinned to it.

"Why don't you open them?" Emma was at her side, nudging her. "If Miriam and Zane have the guts to send you phony letters again, I'll go over there and personally punch their lights out."

She laughed, shaking her head. "Alright, fine. But no punching. No putting out of lights."

She sagged for a split second before bouncing back up again. "Come on then! Open them!"

There were three. She tugged the first one off and opened it.

Zane

Kissy kissâ€"

She screwed it up and threw it across the hall.

Emma lightly pressed her elbow into Cleo's stomach. "It's alright. The next one."

Miriam

Next year? Don't get your hopes up.

She trod on it, a sense of satisfaction welling as she felt the paper shred beneath her sneakers.

"There's one more."

With a sigh, she pulled the last one off her locker. She unfolded it, ready to scrunch it up in a second.

I didn't want them to ruin your Valentine's Day. You are phenomenal, and no amount of stupid comments can change that.

There wasn't a name, but she didn't need to know who it was from. She turned around, and across the hall, she saw Lewis shoving textbooks into his locker.

He waved.

13. Defiance

Defiance

* * *

><p>Gravel pooled in her mouth and she coughed, her throat turning from uncomfortable to raw in a second.</p>

"Get up, shrimp! If you can't handle the way we play, then get out!"

Swiping at her face, ignoring the jagged pain spreading through her face and knees, she stood up. She flicked her curls out of her eyes, blue eyes glinting with something undiscoveredâ€"defiant. "You pushed me, you loser!" she yelled, her fists curling, her rage

battling with the tears, a power overwhelming enough to keep them at bay.

The boy towered over her, at least two years her senior. "What did you say? You tripped on your own stupid feet!"

"I'm not stupid," she shouted, "You pushed me."

"No, I didn't," he said, "You're an idiot just like your mother."

Her anger burst the floodgates, and she shoved the boy in the chest. "Don't you talk about my mother like that!"

He sneered, his face warping. "Why not? It's all she deserves," he said, and as she lunged for him again, he caught her wrists and threw her to the ground. "And that's all you deserve." He nudged her with the toe of his boot as she sputtered, swallowing dirt. "Stay there, shrimp. Where you belong."

He'd hurled her so hard her world closed in and black dots danced in front of her eyes, and she had no breath to regain her footing, let alone her dignity. She stayed there, breathing in choking pants, but only a fraction of air getting in every time. The black dots came for her, lunging, hungry for her consciousness.

"Rikki!"

The voice sounded familiar. Rough, warm hands picked her up and cradled her. Warm breath kissed her cheeks, lips pressed against her hair.

"Sweetheart, what happened? You didn't play with those boys, did you?"

She wrapped her arms around him, the reason for the familiarity finally wiggling into her awareness. "I'm sorry" "Daddy" "

A hand petted her curls. "It's okay, honey. Let's go home, alright? Get you cleaned up."

After a few tries, with her father's help, she got onto her feet and walked with him back to their small apartment.

He sat her in a chair and tended to her scraped knees and her stinging face. He stared into her small blue eyes, his lips pulled tightâ€"not quite a frown, but definitely disapproving. "Sweetheart, I think we need to talk about what happened,"

Her lower lip started trembling and she sniffed, blinking rapidly, determined to slap herself if her mouth didn't stop betraying her that second. "I don't think we should."

He squeezed her hands, his big rough ones enveloping her pale slight ones. "I told you those boys were dangerous, didn't I?"

She looked down at her blue strap sandals, her blonde curls swallowing her face. "Yes,"

"And you played with them anyway."

Her head dipped further. "Yes. I thought I was tough enoughâ€"I really did!" she said, her voice cracking.

He sighed, placing his fingers beneath her chin and angling her face from side to side. "You're plenty tough, honey. But you're still little. Those were very big boys. They could have seriously hurt you, Rikki," he looked down, taking far too long to apply a bandage to her knee. "And after your mother..."

"I'm sorry, Dad."

He stood up, tugging her off her chair and turning her around, seeing if there was a cut or bruise he'd missed. "I know you are," he said. He gave her one last glance and nodded. He leaned down and pressed a kiss to the top of her head. "There. All better."

"Thank you," she said, bouncing on her tiptoes and kissing his cheek.

"You're welcome, sweetheart," he knelt once more, staring into her with a gaze so powerful that even at her young age, she knew she wouldn't be able to break away. "But you can't do that again. Those boysâ€"they don't care. What they do to you. Your mother..."

He stopped, a choked sound blooming in his throat. She wrapped him in a hug. She knew. She understood.

"Don't worry," she whispered. "I won't. Promise."

End
file.